

## Kuwait

Kuwait is an oil-rich Arab country in the northeastern corner of the Arabian Peninsula at the head of the Persian Gulf. A British protectorate from 1899, it became independent in 1961. On Aug. 2, 1990, Kuwait was occupied by Iraqi forces, which remained there until expelled in the PERSIAN GULF WAR of 1991.

Kuwait is bordered on the north and west by Iraq, on the east by the Persian Gulf, and on the south by Saudi Arabia. It ranks third in the Middle East in proven oil reserves (after Saudi Arabia and Iraq), and was a founding member of the ORGANIZATION OF PETROLEUM EXPORTING COUNTRIES (OPEC). Its name is derived from kut, the Arabic word for fort. The capital city, Kuwait, is located on an inlet of the Persian Gulf.

### LAND AND PEOPLE

Kuwait is a virtually flat desert; the highest point is a hill in the south rising to 299 m (981 ft). Of its few oases Al-Jahrah is the largest. Nine offshore islands are included in the national territory, but only one, Failaka, is inhabited. Most of the nation lies below an elevation of 200 m (656 ft). The red desert soils do not favor agriculture. The average daily temperature is 33 deg C (91 deg F), with maxima of 52 deg C (126 deg F). Rainfall ranges from 25 to 175 mm (1 to 7 in) annually, falling mostly in the winter months when cyclones occur. Fierce dust storms, called kaus, may last several days in winter. Most vegetation consists of low bushes and scrub; the marshy coastal areas support halophytic, or salt-loving, plants. Less than 9% of the land is arable, and most water is obtained through desalination.

Kuwaiti society is composed of five strata: the ruling family, old Kuwaiti merchant families, former Bedouins who became city dwellers, Arabs from other countries who obtained citizenship, and foreigners. Arabic is the official language, although many people speak English. Muslims comprise 90% of the population and Christians 8%.

Kuwait has one of the highest per-capita incomes in the world. Prior to the Iraqi invasion Kuwaiti citizens made up less than 40% of the population and less than 20% of the labor force. Non-Kuwaitis—mostly Palestinians, Egyptians, and South Asians—enjoyed most of the welfare benefits of Kuwaiti citizens; the vote was restricted to about 65,000 Kuwaiti males living in Kuwait before 1920 and their descendants.

Kuwait's 1992 population was less than half its prewar size, and the government planned to limit foreigners to less than 50% of the total population. Nearly 400,000 Palestinians were expelled and most Sudanese and Yemenis (groups accused of cooperating with Iraq) were refused employment. Most of the hundreds of thousands of foreign workers who fled the country after the Iraqi invasion were not expected to return, and at least one-third of all Kuwaitis remained outside the country in mid-1992.

### ECONOMIC ACTIVITY

The economy of modern Kuwait is based almost totally on petroleum. By law, 10% of all petroleum revenues have been deposited in a special reserve fund to provide for the time when oil reserves are exhausted. During the occupation much of Kuwait's wealth was shipped to Iraq, although the Kuwaiti government-in-exile controlled its substantial overseas assets.

Limited oil exports resumed in July. The country was expected to reach pre-invasion oil production levels by the end of 1992, but it was estimated that it would take two to five years to restore the economy to its prewar level. To stimulate private investment, the government paid off household debts, increased government salaries, and compensated for war damages. This spending and the costs of the war reduced Kuwait's foreign assets from \$100 billion in 1990 to \$40 billion in 1992.

### HISTORY AND GOVERNMENT

The Sabah dynasty was established in 1756 after Arab tribes settled the area. Kuwait was nominally a province in the Ottoman Empire, but the sheikh received British protection in 1899 when the Turks threatened actual control. Kuwait achieved independence in 1961, but when Iraq claimed the area, Kuwait again received a British pledge of protection.

Under the 1963 constitution, executive power is vested in the emir and exercised by a council of ministers. Sheikh Jabir al-Ahmad al-Sabah became emir in 1977. The legislature was suspended from 1976 to 1981 and again in 1986; an interim council without legislative powers was elected in June 1990. In the 1980s, Kuwait was subject to

terrorist attacks by Shiite Muslim extremists, including a 1985 attempt to assassinate the emir. Kuwait supported Iraq against Iran in the IRAN-IRAQ WAR (1980-88).

On Aug. 2, 1990, after a dispute over oil, money, and boundaries, Iraq occupied Kuwait, a move condemned by the world community. On Jan. 16, 1991, when international diplomatic efforts and sanctions failed to force Iraq to withdraw, a 28-member coalition under U. S. field command launched the PERSIAN GULF WAR, recapturing Kuwait on February 26. The emir returned on March 14 and imposed martial law until June 26. The advisory National council created in 1990 reconvened on July 9. Later that year Kuwait and the United States signed a ten-year security pact. In the parliamentary elections of October 1992 the narrowly defined electorate (only 13% of Kuwaiti nationals, and no women, are eligible to vote) elected the first opposition majority in Kuwait's history. Candidates calling for democratic reform won 31 of 50 seats.

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